



**United States of America
Department of the Interior
Fish and Wildlife Service
Endangered Species Program**

Telephonic Interview Time (08:52)

Topic: Light-footed clapper rail (Host – Brynn Walling with Mike Mace)

This transcript was produced from audio provided by USFWS Endangered Species Program

BEGIN INTERVIEW

(Music plays.)

Brynn: Hi, this is Brynn Walling for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and today I have on the phone Mike Mace. How are you today Mike?

Mike: I'm fine, how are you?

Brynn: Fine thanks. Mike is the curator of birds at the San Diego Zoo Safari Park and today he's gonna tell us about Clapper rails. Could you give us an overview of the species?

Mike: Yeah, the Light-footed clapper rail is a federally listed and state listed endangered species and the reason for its decline was the development of Southern California and that development that occurred basically took contiguous coastal salt marsh and began to fragment it. So as cities and communities were developed and highways went in these marshes were fragmented in such a way that the birds could not normally move about like they had historically and the species ranges from Santa Barbara south to the Northern Baja peninsula. And so this program, this recovery program is designed to be able to do a number of things. One, it's to restore some of the wetlands along the coast, critical habitat like cordgrass and eelgrass. The Clapper rail itself is what we could consider to be a flagship species for coastal salt marsh conservation so this is an endangered species that resides in these marshes and preserving a species like the Clapper rails protects habitats that other species would utilize as well. At one time the population declined to about 220 breeding pairs and through a number of initiatives to recover the species the good news is today the last census that was conducted showed there were more than 500 pairs of Clapper rails. The California Light-footed clapper rail recovery program is a partnership between a number of key organizations; those organizations include the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, California Fish and Game, Huntington Beach Wetland Conservancy, SeaWorld San Diego, Living Coast Discovery Center and the San Diego Zoo Safari Park. That partnership has been working together for a

decade and has been instrumental in increasing the population of Light-footed clapper Rails in the wild.

And so what we've done is established breeding centers and rearing centers for the clapper Rails so eggs are brought in from the wild and that allowed us to establish breeding groups in these breeding centers. And since we've done that we've produced more than 300 birds that have been released and thus the population has responded and recovered to some degree. We still got a lot of work to do but this effort is actually going to be expanding to where we're going to start looking at collaborating with partners in Mexico and looking for next year to import a few eggs from the Mexican population to be able to introduce here in the United States and that will increase our genetic availability. And this is important when you're managing an endangered species that the population has declined to such a rate that you're managing the genetics so you don't end up with these anomalies that can occur from inbreeding that manifest themselves in poor egg quality or lack of egg production or infertility and such and so by raising birds and releasing them in the various marshes of which there's about 18 to 20 marshes here in Southern California we're able to provide to the program what the birds can no longer do; that is transfers between these fragmented areas.

Brynn: What are some of the threats that the Clapper rails face?

Mike: Well, the primary threat is intergradation of habitat but within that because of the development of communities there are other factors such as feral animals, those would be things like dogs and cats that unfortunately will hunt Clapper rails. That's the primary – there's always the natural aspect of predation on the species, you know, from raptors and such but those are natural not domestic and that's an important piece of this because that's all part of a cycle within an ecosystem.

Brynn: And part of these programs are releasing the Clapper rails back into their native habitats, can you tell us a little bit about that process?

Mike: Sure. So for about ten years we have been rearing Clapper rails for release back into the wild. Now this is a pretty involved process. So if we start from the fact in these breeding centers that we've established at these facilities the process goes forward in this manner on an annual basis. The birds produce eggs and typically those pairs raise their own offspring but periodically there's a need to hand raise rails as well and so those hand raised birds are – that activity is done at SeaWorld San Diego and once the – either the parent raised or the hand raised birds are of a certain age then they are transported down by the Living Coast Discovery Center and the US Fish and Wildlife Service offices to these preconditioning facilities and what occurs there is the birds learn the skills they're gonna need to survive in the wild. So a cohort is put in these facilities, from there they learn predator avoidance, they learn how to forge on their own – the habitat is exactly a replica of what they're going to be living in along the coast so they get a chance to acclimate to the weather and climatic conditions and all this is done in preparation for release. And then when it's determined which marsh that the birds will go then there's – during that period of time the birds are caught up, they are inspected for their – given a health assessment to make sure they're healthy for release, their federal leg bands are put on them for identification. The birds are then transferred to a marsh for release; typically it's

quite an event at a release. There's a lot of community support and involvement so there can be 50 people there from local people that live in that area to the federal and state agencies to the partnerships that participate and birds are then set out in crates lined up and then at one point all the crates are opened and the birds fly into the marsh. And usually there's a pretty fair amount of media coverage there which is great, it's great to be able to work with the local communities and people as well as getting the story out in the public again to heighten the awareness of endangered species that live right here in San Diego County among us.

Brynn: Very interesting, thank you. Is there anything else about the Clapper rail you'd like to share with us today?

Mike: I think for species like Clapper rails it's very important that we look at these species as environmental indicators and what I mean by that is they're telling us by whether their populations are stable or declining how healthy the environment is that they're living in. That same environment is the environment that we live in so monitoring and stewarding these endangered species and related species in the end will benefit all life forms that share that same habitat.

Brynn: Thank you very much.

Mike: Thank you very much, bye bye.

[End of Audio]

Duration: 8:52 minutes